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**The Life of Blind
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THE LIFE
OF
BLIND JACK,
OF KNARESBOROUGH.



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THE LIFE

OF

WILLIAM L. GAY

1817-1870



Published by T. KNACK, New York.

THE LIFE OF
BLIND JACK,
OF KNABESBOROUGH.

JOHN METCALF was born at Knabesborough, on the 15th of August, 1717. When four years old he was put to school by his parents, who were working-people, and continued at school two years: he was then seized with the small-pox, which rendered him totally blind, though all possible means were used to preserve his sight. About six months after recovering from the small-pox, he was able to go from his father's house to the end of the street, and return without a guide. In the space of three years he was able to find his way to any part of the town of Knabesborough, and had begun to associate with

boys of his own age, going with them to seek birds' nests ; and for his share of the eggs and young birds, he was to climb the trees, whilst his companions waited at the bottom, to direct him to the nests, and to receive what he should throw down ; and from this he was soon able to climb any tree that he could grasp. He would now ramble into the lanes and fields alone, to the distance of two or three miles, and return.

His father keeping horses, he learned to ride, and in time became an able horseman : a gallop being his favourite pace. His parents, having other children, at the age of thirteen had John taught music, at which he proved very expert ; though he had conceived more taste for the cry of the hound or harrier than the sound of any music. When about fourteen years old, his activity of limbs, and the good success with which his exploits were usually attended, consoled him so greatly for the deprivation of sight, that he was led to imagine that it was in his power to undertake any thing without danger. The following adventure, however, caused him to alter his opinion of its value.

There happened to be a plum-tree a little way

from Knaresborough, where there had been a house formerly. One Sunday, Metcalf and his companions (who were skilled in matters of this sort), would go there to get some of the fruit. In these cases Metcalf was always appointed to ascend, for the purpose of shaking the trees. He was accordingly sent up to his post; but in the height of the business, his companions gathering below, were suddenly alarmed by the appearance of the owner of the tree, and prepared to quit the ground with all expedition. Metcalf, thus left to himself, soon understood how matters were going, though the wind was high, which prevented him from hearing distinctly; and, being inclined to follow his comrades, in making his retreat he fell into a gravel pit, and cut a large gash in his face, without, however, receiving any other injury than a stun, which for some time hindered his breathing, and kept him motionless on the ground. His father being rather severe, Metcalf was afraid to go home, lest his wound should lead to a discovery of the prank he had been engaged in.

Soon after this (though not easily dismayed), he and some other boys were completely alarmed.

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The church-porch of Knaresborough, being the usual place of their meeting, they one night, between eleven and twelve o'clock, assembled there, Metcalf being generally the chief projector of their plans : they determined to rob an orchard ; which being done, they returned to the church-porch to divide their booty. Before their return a circumstance had happened to which they were strangers, but to the discovery of which, the following little incident led, though not immediately. There being a large ring to the church-door, which turned for the purpose of lifting the latch, one of the party took hold of it, and by way of bravado gave a loud rap, calling out, " A tankard of ale here." A voice from within answered very loudly, " You are at the wrong house." This so stupified the whole convoy, that none of them could move for some time. At length Metcalf said, " Did you not hear something speak in the church ?" Upon this they all took to their heels, and ran till they got out of the church-yard, Metcalf running as fast as any of them. The cause of this panic was in consequence of the sexton being engaged in some performance at that untimely hour.

About the year 1731, Metcalf being then fourteen years of age, a number of men and boys made a practice of swimming in the river Nidd, where there are many deeps convenient for that purpose. Metcalf resolving to learn that art, joined the party, and became so very expert that his companions did not choose to come near him, it being his custom to seize them, send them to the bottom, and swim over them by way of diversion. About this time a soldier and another man were drowned in the above deeps: the former, it was supposed, was taken with the cramp: the latter could not swim. Metcalf was sent for to get up the bodies; and at the fourth time of diving he succeeded in bringing up that of the soldier; which, when raised to the surface, other swimmers carried on shore; but he had quite left it. The other body could not then be found.

There are very frequent floods in the river Nidd; and it is a remarkable fact, that in the deep places there are eddies, or some other cause of attraction, which will draw to the bottom any substance, however light, which comes within their sphere of action. Large pieces of timber were often seen to be carried down by the floods.

these, on coming over the deep places, were stopped for the space of a moment, and then sunk.

Some time after this, Metcalf happened to be at the house of one Green, an innkeeper. Two persons then present had a dispute in reference to some sheep, which one of them had put into the pinfold. The owner of the sheep appeared to be ill-treated by the other party, who wished to take an unfair advantage. Metcalf, perceiving that they were not likely to agree about the damages, bade them good night, saying he was going to Knaresborough; but it being about the dead time of night, he was firmly resolved to do a little friendly business before he should go home. The pinfold being walled round, he climbed over; and getting hold of the sheep, one by one, he fairly tossed them over the wall. The difficulty of the service increased as the number grew less, not being so ready to catch: he was not, however, to be deterred, but fully completed the exploit.

At the Royal Oak (now the Granby), in particular, scenes of mirth were often going forward; and at these he greatly attracted the notice of the

landlord's daughters. In the summer he often used to run his horse for the petty plates or prizes given at the feast in the neighbourhood; and on all these occasions, when in her power, she was sure to attend with her female friends, and would offer her assistance in getting a little corn for his race-horses and hunters, as her father had always a quantity by him; and Metcalf began to wonder much at it. She acted as chamber-maid, and would frequently ask him to sit down, and would sit down by him, and ask him to have a little negus or some other liquor. By frequent intercourse the lady and Metcalf became very intimate; and this intimacy produced mutual regard and confidence. Her mother being a high-spirited woman, had brought up her daughters, as she hoped at least, with notions ill-suited to the condition of Metcalf; so that in order to disguise the state of their hearts from her parents, the lovers agreed on a set of names and phrases intelligible to each other, though not so to them. He used to call himself Mary, or Tibby (at once changing the sex, and speaking as if of a third person); and she, Harry or Dickey, or some such name. Whenever he sought to intimate to her

his intention of visiting her, he would say, "You must tell Richard that Mary will be here on such a day." Her mother would perhaps ask, "Who is that?" To which she would reply that it was a young woman who had to meet her brother there. But if the day appointed by Metcalf was not convenient, she would say that "Richard had called, and had left word that Mary should call again at such a time;" meaning the time she wished Metcalf to come: and as she commonly fastened the doors, when she expected him she always left a door or window open. One night, in particular, Metcalf having, in consequence of an appointment, arrived there about midnight, and got in by a window that had been designedly left open. In his way to the 'young' woman's room, he met the 'old one' in the middle of the staircase. Both parties were much surprised, and the mistress asked, angrily, "Who's there? what do you want?" He knowing that she always went to bed early, replied, "I came in last night, sat down in the chair by the fire-side, and fell fast asleep." She then called loudly to her daughter, "Why did you not shew Jack to bed?" I was not to sit up all night for him," replied the lass.

He then pursued his way up stairs, and the girl conducted him to a bed-room.

In the year 1738, Metcalf attained the age of twenty-one years, and the height of six feet one inch and a half, and was remarkably robust withall. At that time there lived at Knaresborough one John Bake, a man of ferocious temper and athletic figure. He was considered in the neighbourhood as a champion, or rather bully; and thus qualified, was often employed especially to serve writs or warrants in cases where desperate resistance was expected. Metcalf, going one evening with a friend to a public-house, they there met this Bake; and a short time after, Metcalf's friend and Bake sat down to cards. The latter took some money off the table, to which he was not entitled; and the former remonstrating on the injustice of Bake, received a violent blow. Metcalf interposing with words only at first, was treated in the same manner; when, instantly entering into combat with this ruffian, he bestowed upon him such discipline as soon extorted a cry for mercy.

About this time, Dr. Chambers, of Ripon, had a well-made horse which he used to hunt; but

finding that latterly he became a great stumbler, he exchanged him with a dealer, who took him to Harrogate; and meeting with Metcalf, told him he had an excellent hunter to sell, at a low price. Metcalf desired to try how the horse leaped; and the owner agreeing, he mounted him, and found that he could go over any wall the height of himself, when saddled. A bargain was soon struck; and this happening at the Queen's Head, several gentlemen, who were witnesses of the horse's performance, invited Metcalf to accompany them two days after, to Belmont Wood, where a pack of hounds were to throw off. These hounds were the joint property of Francis Trapps, Esq., and his brother, of Nidd, near Ripley. A pack superior to this was not to be found in the kingdom; nor were the owners themselves ever excelled in their attention to their dogs and hunters. The wished-for day arriving, Metcalf attended the gentlemen, and the hounds were not long in finding. The fox took away to Plumpton Rocks; but finding all secure there, he made for Stockeld Wood, and found matters in the same state as at Plumpton. He had then run about six miles. He came back, and crossed the river Nidd, near the Old Abbey, and went on the east side of Knaresborough, to a place called Coney Garths, where there were earths, near Scriven. Metcalf's horse carried him nobly; pulling hard, and requiring a proportionate resistance. The wind blew high: Metcalf lost his hat, but would not stop to recover it; and coming to Thistle Hill, near Knaresborough, he resolved to cross the

river at the Abbey Mill, having often before gone on foot over the dam-stones.

When he got to the dam, he attended to the noise of the fall, as a guide; and ranging his horse in a line with the stones, dashed forward for some part of the way; but the stones being slippery with a kind of moss, his horse stumbled; but recovered this and a second blunder: the third time, however, floundering completely, away went horse and rider into the dam. Metcalf had presence of mind to disengage his feet from the stirrups during the descent; but both the horse and himself were immersed over head in water. He then quitted his seat, and made for the opposite side, the horse following him. Having secured his nag, he laid himself down on his back, and held up his heels, to let the water run out of his boots; which done, he quickly remounted, and went up a narrow lane which leads to the road between Knaresborough and Wetherby; and crossing the Boroughbridge road, he got to the Coney Garths, where he found that the whipper-in had only arrived before him. Here the fox had earthed, as was expected; and the other horsemen (who had gone over the low bridge, and through the town), after some time, came up. They were much surprised at finding Metcalf there, and attributed the soaked condition of himself and horse to profuse sweating; nor were they undeceived till (giving up the fox) they got to Scriven, where, upon an explanation of the affair, they laughed heartily. He embraced the first opportunity of a secret

interview with Dolly, which was very agreeable to each of them, as matters continued in the same friendly manner between them as before. During this interval a young man had been paying his addresses to her; and knowing that Metcalf was acquainted with the family, he solicited him to use what interest he had in his behalf. This, when made known to the lady by the man of her heart, afforded them both great entertainment. The name of the young man was Dickinson; and having got such acquaintance with her mother as to become a particular favourite, and not suspecting the intimacy between Metcalf and the young lady, he pushed his suit briskly; and, after a short time, banns were published in the churches of Knaresborough and Kirby-over-Blow.

Metcalf was much surprised, having long thought himself secure of her affection. The publication of the banns being complete, the wedding day was appointed. The supposed bridegroom had provided an entertainment at his house for upwards of two hundred people; and going with a few friends to Harrogate on Sunday, proposed the following day for the nuptials, which were to be solemnized at Knaresborough, intending to return to Harrogate to breakfast, where a bridecake was ready, with a hamper of wine; which latter was to have been carried to Kirby, for the use of the guests he had invited.

On the Sunday, Metcalf riding pretty smartly past the Royal Oak, towards the Queen's Head, was loudly accosted in these words: "One wants to speak with you." He turned immediately to

the stables of the Duke, and, to his great surprise, found there his favourite, who had sent her mother's maid to call him. 'Well, lass,' said he, 'thou'rt going to have a merry day to-morrow: am I to be the fiddler?' 'Thou shalt never fiddle at my wedding,' replied she. 'What's the matter; what have I done?' said Mercat. 'Matters may not end,' said she, 'as some folks wish they should: or at least, I do not wish things to be as they are provided: I could wish things to be done another way.' 'What?' said he, 'hadst thou rather have me? canst thou bear starving?' 'Yes,' said she, 'with thee I can!' 'Give me thy hand then, lass; skin for skin: it's all done!' said he; and she willingly gave him her hand.

The girl who had called him being present, he told her that as she and his horse were the only witnesses to what had passed, he would kill the first who would divulge it. The girl made reply, 'You may depend upon it I will not divulge the matter;' so Jack was not afraid of the horse. Their immediate concern was to fix on some plan, as Miss Benson was afraid of being missed by her friends. Jack, very prompt at an expedient, desired that she would that night place a candle in one of the windows in the old house, as soon as the coast was clear, and herself ready to set off; which will doubtless appear to the reader a very extraordinary signal to a blind man; but he had conceived measures for carrying the intended elopement into effect, by the assistance of a third person. This being approved, off she went into the

house, and in a short time was followed by Metcalf, who was warmly received by the supposed bridegroom and company. The tankard went briskly round, with 'Success to the intended couple;' in which toast, it may readily be believed, Metcalf joined them most heartily; but it filled Metcalf with such thoughts that he scarcely knew how to carry himself in the affair, though after being a little in the company, he came to a more composed state of mind. Having stayed till it was near dark, he thought it time for putting business into a proper train. Going then to a public-house, known by the name of the World's End, he enquired for the ostler, whom he knew to be a steady fellow; and after obtaining from this man a promise either to serve him in an affair of moment, in which he was engaged, or keep the secret, he related the particulars of his assignation, and the intended elopement; to forward which he desired him to let him have his master's mare, which he knew would carry double. This agreed on, he requested the further service of meeting him at the Raffle-Shop at ten o'clock. A whistle was to be given by the first who got there, as a signal. They met pretty punctual; and Metcalf asked him if he saw a star, meaning the light before-mentioned; he said he did not: but staying about half an hour, and the light not appearing, it caused some little doubt in Metcalf's mind respecting the affair. In a little time the star was in the place appointed. They then drew towards the house where their business laid, and left the horses at a distance.

On the door being opened by the lady, he asked her if she was ready ; to which she replied in the affirmative. At that time it was not a matter of so much difficulty to get married as it is at present ; and they, with only the trouble of riding twelve miles, were united. His over-night's execution made him rather thoughtful, having got a bird, but no cage for it.

While he was musing on this subject, an acquaintance, who made one of the intended bridegroom's company the evening before, came up, and asked him to take a glass with him. Metcalf quickly guessed what his business was, but adjourned with him to a private room, seemingly concerned. 'Metcalf,' said he, 'a strange thing has happened since you were with us last night, concerning Dolly Benson, who was to have been married this morning to Anthony Dickinson. You are suspected of knowing something about the former ; and I shall briefly state to you the consternation which her disappearance has occasioned, and the reasons why suspicion falls upon you. This morning early, the bridegroom went to Knaresborough, and informed the Rev. Mr. Collins that he and his intended wife were coming that forenoon to be married. In his absence Mrs Benson and her other daughter began to prepare breakfast ; and observing that Dolly lay very long in bed, her mother desired that she might be called ; but her usual bed-fellow declaring she had not slept with her, she was ordered to seek her in some of the other rooms. This was done, but without effect. They then took it for granted

that she had taken a ride with Mr. Dickinson, but he returning, could give no account of her. All her friends began now to be very seriously alarmed; and amongst other fearful conjectures, supposed that she might have fallen into the well, in attempting to draw water for breakfast, and actually got some iron creepers and searched the well. Her brother then took horse, and rode to Burton Leopard, to a young man who had slightly paid his addresses to her; and informing him of the distress of the family, begged he would give information, if in his power. The young man immediately asked if he had seen Blind Jack: he answered, that you were at the Oak last night, but did not in the least suspect you. The other, however, persisted in the opinion that you were most likely to know where the girl was.

Metcalf put an end to the narrative by saying, 'I married her since you saw me last night!' declaring the truth; and thinking it his duty to conciliate those whom he had offended, he employed the softest phrases he was master of on the occasion. He begged pardon, through their son, of Mr. and Mrs. Benson, as the distance was great in circumstances, whom he could not presume to call father and mother; and wished them to believe that the warmth of his passion for their daughter, with the despair of obtaining their consent, had led him to the measure he had taken; and he would make them the best amends in his power, by the affectionate conduct he should observe to his wife. The messenger left Metcalf, and reported this declaration to her parents; but

they were as well pleased at it as they would have been at the sight of their building in flames; and in the height of their passion, declared they would put him death to if they met with him.

The poor forlorn Dickinson then departed, accompanied by one of Mr. Benson's sons. When they got near his home they heard two sets of bells; viz., those of Harewood and Kirby-over-Blow, ringing in expectation of the arrival of the bride and bridegroom. The reason of Harewood bells ringing was, Dickinson had lived there a little while before; but the sound was more like that of a knell to him, who fell from his horse through anguish, but was relieved through the kind attention of his friend. It now became a matter of wonder that she should have preferred a blind man to Dickinson; she being as handsome a woman as any in the country. A lady having asked her why she refused so many good offers for Blind Jack, she answered, 'Because I could not be happy without him.' And being more particularly questioned, she replied, 'His notions are so singular, and his spirit so manly and enterprising, that I could not help liking him.' Metcalf being interrogated, on his part, how he had contrived to obtain the lady, replied, that many women were like liquor-merchants, who purchased spirits above proof, knowing that they could lower them at home; and this he thought, would account why many a rake got a wife while your plotting sons of phlegm were doomed to celibacy. The parents were afterwards reconciled, and on the birth of the second child, Mrs Benson herself

was godmother, and presented Jack with twenty guineas.

In the year 1745, Jack entered the military service as musician, then ready to march against the Scotch rebels; and was present at the battle of Preston Pans. He distinguished himself by his acts of bravery, and was noticed particularly by the Duke of Cumberland and the commanding officers.

About a year after their return, a vacancy happening in the representation for the city of York, the citizens sent for Mr Thompson, and unanimously elected him, free of expense.

A short time after this the militia was raised, and he was, as his merit well entitled him to be, appointed Colonel of the West York battalion; which situation he held, with advantage to the service, and honour to himself, for the remainder of his life.

It was also customary with him to buy horses for sale in Scotland, bringing back galloways in return; and in this traffic he depended on feeling the animals to direct his choice.

He also engaged pretty deeply in contraband trade, the profits of which were at that time more considerable than the risk. In the year 1755, Metcalf commenced a new employ. He set up a stage-waggon between York and Kharet-

borough, being the first on that road, and conducted it constantly himself, twice a-week in the summer-season, and once in winter; and this business, together with the occasional conveyance of army baggage, employed his attention until the period of his first contracting for making roads, which fitted him better. He disposed of his draught and interest in the road to one Guisely.

He made betwixt Huddersfield and Wakefield, ten miles of a road, and received for it about two thousand five hundred pounds. On the road to Manchester, he made a bridge, twelve yards span, and received for it about three thousand five hundred pounds; and from Dock-lane-end, to Ashton-under-Line, and part of the road from Ashton to Stockport, and from Stockport to Mortram-Langdale; the length of the whole being about fifteen miles, including drains, arches, and walls; for which he received two thousand two hundred pounds. He then made eight miles of road from Randalcalbred, in the road from Chapel-le-Frith, to Macclesfield, and made several bridges in the same road, for which he received two thousand pounds: he made six miles of road from Congleton to Red Bull, entering into Staffordshire, for which he received three thousand five hundred pounds; and many other similar contracts, for which he received proportionate sums.

In the summer of 1778, the much-loved partner of his cares, died of a rheumatic complaint, after

thirty-nine years of conjugal felicity, which was never interrupted but by her illness, or his occasional absence.

In the year 1792 he returned into Yorkshire; and having no engagements to employ his attention, he bought hay to sell again, measuring the stacks with his arms; and having learned the height, he could easily tell what number of square yards were contained in from one to five hundred pounds value. Sometimes he bought a little wood standing; and if he could get the girth and height, would calculate the solid contents. From that period he was settled on a small holding at Spoforth, near Wetherby; and his house was kept by a daughter.

At Christmas, 1794, he paid a visit to the present Colonel Thornton, and his mother, at Thornville Royal; and the reception he met with was such as fully reminded him of former days at Old Thornville, where he had spent many a Christmas. The truly respectable relict and worthy representative of the late Commander always received Blind Jack with a condescending affability, highly flattering to one in his humble station.

Having known the streets of York very accurately in his early life, he determined, on the commencement of the year 1795, to visit once more that ancient city, where he had not been for the space of thirty years. He found alterations

for the better in Spurrier-gate, Blake-street, and Pavement, and other places; and being now in the neighbourhood of Middlethorp, where he had, in the year 1735, spent half a year so happily, he resolved to have another look at it, in the possession of its present worthy master.

From Mr. Barlow's house there is a road which leads to Bishopthorp; and this road he clearly recollected, though sixty years had elapsed since he had gone that way before. So retentive was his memory on this occasion, that he discovered an alteration in the hanging of two gates, by a wall near the above mansion. At Mr. Barlow's he stayed several nights, which, we need scarcely add, were spent in the most agreeable manner; he endeavouring to make his fiddle speak the satisfaction and hilarity felt by its owner.

Returning to York, he spent a few nights at the house of another of his friends, in the same cheerful manner; from hence he set out on the 9th of January, 1795. He walked to Green Hammerton, on his way to Thornville Royal, in about three hours and a half, being ten miles: he proceeded to Thornville Royal that night, and so to Knaresborough next morning, the 10th; which being the birth-day of Sir Thomas Slingsby's eldest son, he resolved to spend that day at the worthy Baronet's.

Here he closed the festive season of Christmas after a tour of some weeks amongst his old friends.

From thence he returned to his mansion at Spafford, where he resided with his daughter; to whom, no doubt, he related the particulars of his last tour; but nothing particular occurred after this period worthy of record. He enjoyed the perfect possession of his mental faculties, and could converse with ease and propriety, and still enjoyed the society of his friends, until the month of April, 1810; on the 27th of which month, this extraordinary character finished his life, in the ninety-third year of his age; eighty-seven of which he was in perpetual darkness; yet the Almighty had endowed him with abilities to undertake and complete a number of contracts, not inferior to any experienced engineers.

At the time of his decease his descendants were four children, twenty grand-children, and ninety great and great grand-children.

